DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 305 CG 009 672

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TITLE A Non-Fundamentalist Approach to the Fundamentals of Ethics in the Study of Natural Groups.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 23p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Behavioral Science Research; Confidentiality; *Ethics; Field Studies; *Guidelines; *Humanization; Human Relations; Psychological Studies; Research; *Research Problems

ABSTRACT

This is a discussion of the new American Psychological Association guideline to "Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants" (1973) as applied to the study of natural groups in both the field and laboratory. Presented is a resume of some of the problems and solutions as they were encountered and resolved. Among the problems discussed are: (1) the use of privileged information, (2) the possibility of harming experimental subjects, and (3) disclosure to subjects of experimental objectives and results. The issue of confidentiality is also mentioned with an emphasis on the problems this requirement creates for the researcher. The author concludes that the new ethical guidelines have neither crippled nor greatly helped those conducting research with human subjects. Generally, the guidelines remind the researcher to proceed with caution and consider all aspects of working with human subjects. However, this should not interfere with the development of new research techniques and methodologies. (Author/BW)

ED105305

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Abstract

Discussion of the effect of the new American Psychological Association guideline to "Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants" (1973) as applied to the study of natural groups in both the field and laboratory. The paper is a resume of some of the problems and solutions as they were encountered and resolved at the Oklahoma State University Center for Social Psychological Studies. The report is based on the author's participation in a panel discussion at Southwestern Psychological Association's 22nd Annual Convention.

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The new American Psychological Association guidelines for research with human subjects (APA, 1973) did not create problems for those of us studying natural groups. Researchers who study the individual in his natural habitat, that is, naturally occurring social units, have perforce been acutely aware of the ethical problems.

The natural, informal, group in its purest form is probably best represented by the street gang (Sherif & Sherif, 1964; Whyte, 1943). The natural group, however, is not necessarily a street gang. It may be any social unit upon which outside sources of social power have neither imposed a status structure nor unduly prescribed the role relationships or other normative aspects developed through interaction among the members.

The study of the effects of established social relationships upon human behavior will require, at least eventually, that the factors represented at the psychological level of analysis, such as the reciprocal expectancies among members of the small informal group, be examined as they exist in everyday life. Regardless of the benefits derived from the

implications of studies utilizing attributed aspects of human relationships, we must, sooner or later, validate the findings through studies in which the participants are unaware of the internal factors involved and in which the social context remains intact. The social context which has proven to date to be both valid and amenable methodologically for study is the small informal group.

A group exists only to the degree that properties such as status and role relationships and other normative characteristics governing the behavior of the members exist. These properties exist, ultimately, only in the minds of the members. However, as social stimuli and sociogenic factors they are among the prime determinants of individual behavior. To study human behavior as it is affected by the interaction of factors operating in real-life requires that the social context, the group, remain intact and also that it remain in its natural state, i.e., that its characteristics not be uppermost in the awareness of the members.

The study of human behavior in relation to the natural group may be undertaken in either the field, the laboratory, or both. In either case, the group's characteristic properties must remain intact, and in both cases, numerous ethical problems arise.

Problems Encountered in Field Studies

The new guidelines do not, probably could not, and possibly should not, cover many of the specific ethical problems

encountered during a program of study of natural groups. The problems present during natural group studies, and experimentation involving natural groups, vary from group to group and from situation to situation. The very general guideline that "the human participants [should] emerge from their research experience unharmed" (APA, 1973, p. 11) is certainly the central issue around which the network of ethical considerations in any such study must be developed.

Concern for the subjects' betterment is reflected in the guideline's proposal that subjects should benefit, directly if possible, from the research. The temptation for the individual researcher in the field to intervene, to step in and help the subjects in their real-life problems, has been, and is, a constantly present problem. The strength of the feeling among research workers that many subjects need help is evident. Over one-third of our nonparticipant field observers who observed natural groups of lower socio-economic teenaged boys for a period of a year or more later shifted their academic and career work to social work or similar "service" oriented areas. This temptation to help threatens not only the objectivity of a study but also poses a real potential for doing harm to the subjects. The field observer, through his work, knows some of the power relations in the group, and it is tempting for him to utilize them.

Threats to the objectivity of the study and considerations of violations of the research design aside, there are ample reasons why the field researcher should stay clear of

interfering activity. The danger of harm to the subjects, i.e., members of natural groups, varies directly with the "groupness" of the group. The more intensely necessary, psychologically and sociologically, the group is for its members, the more the group provides the structure for the members' social world, the more likely well-meaning, but ill-considered, revelations of the social factors related to the intragroup relationships might traumatically affect the individual members. The more the tampering with the relationships of group members appeals to the field worker, the greater are the chances that the subjects will be hurt by the interference.

The first sentence of Principle Eight of the Guidelines (APA, 1973) states, "After the data are collected, ethical practice requires the investigator to provide the participant with a full clarification of the nature of the study and to remove any misconceptions that may have arisen" (p. 77). Compliance with the letter of this sentence and a failure to recognize the underlying spirit of helping--not hurting--subjects, can make good intentions a means of devastating harm to the subjects. The last sentence of Principle Eight reads, "Where scientific or humane values justify delaying or withholding information, the investigator acquires a special responsibility to assure there are no damaging consequences for the participant" (p. 77).

A clinical psychologist would not inform a client of personality factors which the clinician suspected might cause

trauma beyond his, the client's, ability to cope. The social psychological researcher certainly has as great a responsibility, especially in view of the fact that he is usually in a less advantageous position to detect and remedy socio-psychological damage to the individual. The social psychologist is, most often, less able than the clinician to ascertain accurately the effect of his revelations in regard to a specific individual and must therefore be all the more cautious.

Observations of individuals and natural groups frequently (always, if the nonparticipant observer method is used) take place without the subjects' being aware of the observer's aims, goals, and methods. Some tight-knit groups employ a high degree of secrecy to protect themselves from being detected by outsiders during some of their activities. It is to overcome tendencies toward secrecy that the observer must become a trusted friend of the group if his observations are to be of value. Such secrecy indicates that the members of such groups do realize that all behavior which occurs in public, even in the presence of only one other person, is always being observed and in a sense is being recorded. The recording, of course, may be only in the memory of the other person or persons present.

The fact is that a casual, everyday onlooker's recordings may be faulty, and later will be distorted by factors such as self-interest, intervening events, and other factors present both at the time of observation and and at the time of recall. Such casual observation and recall certainly should be less valid than the observation and recordings of trained observers.

This does not alter the fact that public behavior is always observed to some degree, and is potentially subject to being recalled, sooner or later, if circumstances so demand. A person in public knows, at some level of awareness, that he is being observed. Statements to the effect that "you are being observed" are not only intrusive, but they do immediately change the factors, and the saliency of factors, and consequently the behavior of the individuals.

The common supposition seems to be that the intentions of the observer make the ethical difference between the person who casually, in the course of everyday life, observes a wide variety of human behavior and the scientific investigator. Of course we have no way either of knowing what intended use, or later opportunistic use, the casual observer may make of observed behavior in any given instance. The gamut of possibilities certainly runs from destructive profiteering to humanitarian helpfulness. Here, possibly, the scientific investigator is at an ethical advantage. He at least does know his intentions (certainly he should), and of course he further knows, in most cases, the range of behavior he expects to encounter or find lacking.

So far it would appear that social psychologists or other behavioral scientists may, from the ethical viewpoint of our society, be rather more innocuous than the friends or strangers observing a group's or individual's behavior. When we add professional ethics or rules, concerned with safeguarding the identity of the subjects when their recorded behavior is

publicly presented, the scales tip more, as they should, in favor of the scientific observer. Yet there are problems created by our expertise and the technology available.

Technology now provides the means for very accurate recording of behavior. It might be held that a person with an eidetic memory is the equal of a tape recorder or a closed circuit television system. I have known trained observers who could almost match the television camera and microphone, at least for short periods of observation, when they were given the opportunity to record immediately following the observation periods. However, in practical, everyday research, with the observers usually available to the researcher or the researcher's own abilities, this ideal is seldom attained. There is a more important difference, however, between the human and electronic observer. Ethical considerations aside, it is not often practical to conceal the human observer. It is all too easy, and therefore tempting, to conceal the electronic recorder. The planting of a "bug" changes the whole situation from the ethical viewpoint.

When a person is known to be present, and therefore known to be recording with his normal faculties what occurs in his presence, subjects in the field or in the laboratory can suit their behavior to what they are willing to do in the presence of the other person or persons. This is not the case when subjects assume themselves to be unobserved because other persons are apparently not present. If the tendencies of governments and other investigatory agencies continue, the time may

yet come when the average, private individual sweeps his immediate surroundings with his twenty-five dollar "bug" detector before engaging in what he assumes to be private behavior. That time hopefully is not yet here.

In our research we have drawn the line at intruding electronically when people assume they have privacy. On the basis of our individual and collective research norms we have placed the planted "bug" beyond the ethical limits. The single exception is in the laboratory when the subject clearly understands such surveillance is being conducted, that his judgments are being recorded, and he volunteers to enter and remain in the situation. To date, no individual or group has hesitated to participate.

On the other hand it appears logical that means taken to record accurately what the subjects say and do (given that they certainly realize that the presence of other persons does per se place them under observation) are definitely to the subjects' advantage. The likelihood of distortion from all possible sources are reduced. When feasible, then, electronic note-taking devices carried on the observer's person are not only desirable but are more in keeping with the principle of presenting observations accurately. Certainly such a principle is ethical. Such methods actually more accurately record and preserve the subjects' behavior, reducing the waste of both the subjects' and observer's time which may occur through sloppy observing and recording. When the observer follows the traditional methods of nonparticipant observation,

i.e., without taking notes in the presence of the subjects, there is a good chance of some loss in the accuracy of the record. Of course in working with some groups the potential danger to the observer if recording devices are discovered precludes their use. The intrusion of police agents, "narcs", has made some groups very sensitive to all outsiders and has made the observer's job much more difficult and sometimes even dangerous.

It would appear, then, to be more rigorous and more ethical to use unobtrusive, observer-carried, electronic note-taking devices in the service of accuracy. It seems illogical that sloppy observation and recording is ethical but that accurate observation and recording is unethical. If the thinking that would not allow the use of electronic note-taking devices were followed we should, as logically, prohibit the unannounced use of contact lenses on observers with faulty eyesight, or the use of inconspicuous hearing aids by observers whose hearing is impaired.

The ethical code which our research group has developed is that what is openly presented, verbally or non-verbally, in our presence is fair grist for the data mill. What is said by subjects must be presented to the best of our ability in its full context, and conclusions as to social factors involved, such as power related to status position which are implied from criteria such as effective initiative in group situations, should be supported by independent analysis of the data by an analyst not present when the behavior occurred. To obtain this objec-

tivity a detailed presentation of observed and recorded interaction is essential.

Privileged information. To this point in the discussion only methodological rigor and the ethics associated with method have been considered. As we increase the accuracy of our records, we are exposed, in some cases at least, to the possibility of our observations', by their very accuracy, injuring the subjects through our being required to furnish evidence of their illegal activities. This problem is referred to in Principle Ten, Section E (APA, 1973).

We have been, over the years, privy to a good deal of information which, if revealed, might harm our subjects. The teenaged members of natural groups who are the principle targets of our investigations do, from time to time, commit illegal acts. The frequency and degree of their illegality vary from group to group and from time to time. When a group is observed over a period of several months it is likely that at least some members will engage in illegal activities.

Probably the least suspect of illegal activities was a church affiliated group of boys who were about fifteen years of age. When one of the boys reached the age of sixteen, and could therefore get his driver's license, they scraped together enough resources to obtain an automobile. Unfortunately, getting the car exhausted their money and within a few days obtaining gasoline became a problem. The group goal of riding in the highly-prized automobile was accomplished by their siphoning gasoline from cars in their own church parking lot during Wednesday and

weekend church meetings. These boys did not belong to a gang whose goals included anti-social or illegal acts. To the contrary, it was simply a group of church-attending, normally law-abiding youths who, when they had exhausted, in their opinion, legitimate means of accomplishing their highly desired goals, resorted to an obviously effective solution. Even the street groups who frequently commit illegal acts seldom, if ever, exist for this purpose. Their goals, much the same as those of the middle and upper class groups, involving cars, girls, clothes, and entertainment, are simply more frequently obtained by nonapproved means. Illegal means are used because other means are not perceived as available.

The professional social scientist needs, if he is to keep faith with his subjects, the same legal protection for confidentiality provided the clergyman, lawyer, doctor, newsman (?), and in some places, the clinician. For the protection of our observers, we have always informed the local law enforcement agencies and courts that we will be observing teenaged groups within their jurisdictions. This notification is an effort to protect the observer from a court sentence if the members of a group he is observing are apprehended for the commission of a crime while he is with them. A second reason is to enable the observer to remain with his group if they are jailed for short periods so he will not have to disclose his real reasons for being with the group by calling on the principle investigator to obtain his release.

In every locale in which we have worked to date, a proposal has been made by the police that they have access to our

records. When this proposal is turned down on our contention that it is not only unethical but that it would also negate our ability to do research in the area, that has always been the end of the matter. No further pressure has followed, and we work under a very unofficial "gentlemen's agreement." So far neither we, nor any observer, has been forced to violate what we feel strongly to be our responsibilities to our usually unwitting subjects. We are constantly aware, however, of our unprotected position in this respect. A question we frequently ask among ourselves is, "How much longer can we get by without a confrontation?"

If it were just the principle investigator and his professional associates who were under this sword of Damocles, it would be bad enough. There are, however, the students who do most of the actual observation in the field. There is no need for the police to obtain access to our written reports from observers. The observer himself is most vulnerable and most potentially subject to pressure. Under the present laws we can offer him no protection except the prearranged agreement mentioned above. In a real confrontation we would be powerless, legally, to help. Methods which employ simulation and the attribution of social relations by the experimenter are not only cheaper and simpler than field work with real groups (questions of validity aside), they are also a great deal less stressful and safer for both the researcher and his assistants.

Ethics and Experiments with Natural Groups

In field studies the foci of ethical considerations are

three-fold: (1) the possibility of harming the subjects by interference, (2) the threat of being forced to reveal information to the police or courts, and (3) the need for and the extent of unobtrusive measurement in which an observer does not inform the subjects he is formally recording their behavior. Of course some of these concerns remain when we shift our research from the field to the experimental laboratory. When experimental methods are used to study natural groups, the focus changes, however, from recording (which is obvious to the subjects in an experiment) to the need for, and the form of, deception.

Probably the foremost problem in experimentation with natural groups is whether or not to reveal exactly the object of the experiment to the subjects prior to their participation. Such disclosure is obviously a prerequisite for informed consent. Closely related is the problem of how thorough a debriefing can be given without jeopardizing the naivete of the members of other groups from the same geographic area.

The majority of experimental studies of natural groups involves measuring the social relations, reciprocal expectancies, and other structural, normative, functional, or affect relationships among the members. Revelation of the specific experimental objectives would seriously confound the factors being tapped. Many of the experimental methods for the determination of the various aspects of real groups depend on the projective-like techniques of psychophysical-social judgment situations. Behaviors reflecting internal referents, such as the reciprocal expectancies among group members, are valid indicators of how

such factors normally function only when the individuals are unaware that the factors are under study. The results of the interaction of such factors are subtly revealed through an interpretation of the data generated by judgments of the subjects in regard to ambiguous physical stimuli under various conditions of social relations as they exist in the group.

Most often the group members are consciously aware neither of the existence of the crucial group factors being measured nor their determinants. A rather well-known example is when a natural group of boys, in which the degree of groupness is somewhat below that of a street gang with its openly designated leader, war chief, etc., is approached and asked, "Who is your leader?" Their usual reply is, "We don't have a leader; we just hang around together." The group, however, does have a leader when leadership is operationally defined as "effective initiative," and the leader will show a relatively high level of power during norm formation in the autokinetic, or similar (Pace & MacNeil, 1974), judgment formation situations (MacNeil, 1967). Raising the awareness of the subjects regarding the purposes of the study sharply decreases the chances of its fulfilling its intended purpose.

Revealing the results of the experiment can also seriously disrupt the social world of the group members. Again, the more grouped the group, the more likely will revelations as to structure and functional relations result in serious harm to the individuals. Feeling no compulsion to hurt, we feel no compulsion to reveal recklessly.

On the other hand we have not been able to detect how not telling the subjects can do them any harm. Judgments are made in relation to fairly simple physical stimuli with no implications to the subjects of personality quirks, intelligence ratings, or other highly ego-involving themes. To be sure they inevitably express a mild curiosity about "how well we did" despite our stated, and reiterated, experimental rationale that "We are not interested in how well you do personally--just in how well people do on the average."

Our concern for our subjects' welfare has led to efforts to detect if any trauma results from the group members' participation in the experimental study of their group. Since we started using an arbitrary-norm implantation technique (MacNeil, 1967; MacNeil & Pace, 1973), using the social pressure of experimenter-collaborators (who are now group members) to cause specific group members to perceive the judgment stimuli differently from the way in which their non-indoctrinated fellow members perceive them, we have observed the results of our experimental manipulations on both the individual members and the group. This requires a continued period of field observation following the groups' participation in the laboratory studies. To date there have been indications neither of disruption of the group nor of individuals showing signs of stress. Since by the time a group is used in laboratory experiments the observer is in close contact with his group, and he is accepted as a completely reliable friend in front of whom neither verbal nor nonverbal behavior need be restricted, his reports on the group provide

highly valid records of their behavior which would quickly reveal any harmful effects of our research.

We feel, however, that additional safeguards are desirable. Observation of the group by other people on the research team provides one means of double-checking. However, we have found this to be of doubtful value in some cases, not only because the observer is closer to the group than anyone else and observations by an "introduced" observer are much more casual, but also because using another member of the research team still involves the same biases held by the observer, i.e., the possibility of distortions derived from knowledge of the project's goals. To counteract this potential source of bias on the part of research team members, we are making efforts to bring a non-research team professional into contact with the group. To date, our "safety valve" has been a clinical psychologist, accustomed to street work with groups, who reports to the project director only indications of stress among the group members. He establishes an entirely separate relationship with the group soon after the observer gains acceptance by the group. It is not that we feel the clinician's observations are any more valid than our own. It is simply that his relationship with the group and his viewpoint are different, and he is less likely to be biased in favor of the research project.

It has been suggested by some of our colleagues, who work for the most part with college students as their subjects, that we should tell our subjects of the particulars of the psychophysical-social judgment situations. Our deception is that we do not tell

about some of the aspects of the situation. One such omission is the fact that the autokinetic light does not actually move. These same colleagues agree with us that we should not reveal power relations found in street gangs and neighborhood groups, but they are concerned about the deception involved in not revealing, for example, that the random clusters of beeps, to which the subjects have been giving a wide range of numerosity estimates, actually all have the same total.

We feel, on the other hand, that not revealing all the details constitutes a very mild form of deception since the frequency of presentation of the stimuli is well above subitizing limit, and the subjects are told that they cannot count the stimuli but must make the best estimates that they can. Subjectively the stimuli are different, and we see no gain for the subject in his being informed after the experiment that the stimuli were all the same in regard to this one aspect. This may be, we realize, a rationalization on our part because we know from sad experience that telling one group of subjects in a locale that the light does not really move, even when secrecy is pledged, means that the next group from that town or area knows about "the light that doesn't really move", and the group cannot be used for the experimental phases of the study. It is extremely expensive to locate groups and to determine their structure in the field. It seems to us that not telling the subjects the full details of the situation does them no harm and permits us to continue work which may benefit others in their position at a later date.

There are a number of principles covered by the guidelines that have not been specifically mentioned in this paper. Most of them are accepted as obviously necessary or at least so basic to ethical relationships among people as to need no elaboration. Included are establishing and living up to clear and fair agreements. If something is promised, it should be delivered. This applies to the use of time, the payment of money, or the providing of information. The obligation to assure both confidentiality and sufficient camouflage in published reports to conceal identities is accepted by most researchers.

The steps taken to assure confidentiality are sometimes, to say the least, sloppy. In many laboratories and faculty offices raw data and reports are lying around neither attended nor secure. The custodial services' gossip network should be as effectively countered as the student gossip network, which is also frequently provided with tidbits through carelessness. Locks for files and drawers which are not accessible to custodians and students are a relatively cheap means of assuring confidentiality. A locked and slotted report box for field observers' reports extends the ethical considerations beyond the mere letter of the guidelines. These, and like specifics, provide few problems in working with natural groups. Their being mentioned at all reflects our efforts for full coverage rather than that correctives in these areas are usually deemed necessary.

More bothersome are the less simple situations in which a member of a group (a group on which the researcher has spent four to six months of field study) decides to withdraw from participation

in laboratory situations. This problem has not arisen for us to date. When it does occur the researcher may find himself in a position over which he has little control. Our experience indicates that a group which had decided to participate, for whatever reasons, would do the coercing and an individual member would have little choice in the matter. What should the researcher do? Does he have any right, ethically, to interfere in the group's activity (barring threat to life or limb) in such a case? Such a situation will occur, sooner or later. How we will solve the dilemma will depend on the whole situation at the time. All we can hope to do is make the fairest decision possible--for the subjects.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have neither been crippled nor greatly helped by the new ethical guidelines. They are welcomed to the extent they increased our awareness of the problems we work with daily. Probably their greatest contribution was that they sharpened our definitions of the problem areas and resulted in our interacting more specifically in regard to some aspects of methods used to safeguard human subjects. Since we are convinced that at least some of the studies of social behavior must involve established social relations formed in real-life situations over time, we have not given up the study of natural groups. We have not become paranoid to the point of thinking the new guidelines were designed to force all research into the attribution of social relationships by the experimenter, role playing, or the undisguised questionnaire formats.

Eventually the findings from the more restricted, less complicated situations used for the experimental study of social factors will have to be tested under realistic conditions. This must be done using subjects and their relationships as they are found in real life. The development of new techniques and methodologies for research in the multi-variate world of social interaction is essential and requires that we deal with both the methodological and the ethical problems. The spirit of the new ethical guidelines for research with human subjects does not preclude such work. It does remind us to proceed with caution, considering all aspects of the problems connected with work using human subjects including the social context. Our work with natural groups is justified by the potential meaningfulness of our efforts. Our goals are not only to discover facts regarding human behavior but, ultimately, to help humans attain a more adaptive, less stressful, satisfying life. We do not seek the privilege of going beyond other individuals in observing human behavior, and we fully recognize our responsibility to preserve the anonymity of our subjects and to protect them from any harm which might derive from our work. We feel we help our subjects, and others like them, most by doing our research, both in the field and in the laboratory, as thoroughly and as accurately as an appropriate technology allows.

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